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a true story

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Queering as speculative practice

A true story

Michael Haldrup

Roskilde, Festival Site, July 2017

I accidentally ran into Greg, a recent graduate from the US now on his first trip abroad, in-between concerts and showers. Both of us looking for a dry place to sit and enjoy a rare sun glimpse at the elsewhere wet and muddy festival site. Greg had never heard about any university in Roskilde, but he liked the sound of "PER-FOR-MANCE DESIGN. It clearly triggered his imagination, and during our quick break from the rain and the music he enquired me about this fascinating discipline in which all sorts colorful people and projects had to meet; a discipline building on multiculturalism and multiplicity, social, ethnical genderwise, sexual and much more; an elusive discipline saturated with emancipatory intentions and love of all things marginal, of movement, non-fixity, constant surprise and humor. Fluidity and stickiness. Perhaps a queer discipline. Actually, I correct him, it's pretty, straight, pretty white, European and non-inclusive, I say, remembering being told rather stories by students with experiences of being non-white, non-hetero or just non-compliant with dominant normative codes at our Eurocentric, middleclass class-cum-mainstream university. Stories about exclusion, stigmatization, feelings of being "out of place". Then you should be the queer, Greg says, calling me out from my speculative introversion. Me? Oh alright, white, male, middle-aged intellectual...queer...? How's that? I mean...you should do it... queer it! And that is the end of our discussion. We split up again. Me with the irritating thought of "queering" as a speculative practice, a challenge. For me, and perhaps all of us.

London, Russel Square, January 2018

I am in-between trains in London on my way north to Leicester when I meet Denis at London Library at Russel Square. Denis is a Russian-born philosopher, art critic and performer with a special inclination to classical archaeology, now living a life distributed between Bruxelles, London and Athens. For the six month we have – on mail and skype – been discussing a proposal for a European project using "queer-ing" as a methodology for reformulating European cultural heritage as an asset for future re-orientation of values, ideas and futures on a continent torn with conflict, crisis (Brexit, migration, debt, climate) and seemingly paralyzed political institutions. Now we meet. Having read his long and complex texts on deconstruction, discourse and Greek antiquity I am baffled by the imagination that emerges when we meet up in person. Soon we have immersed ourselves in a wilderness of wild growing ideas for reconfiguring academia and cultural heritage. Using mockumentaries of speculative – but potential – pasts as intellectual weaponry, experimental performances and artworks (including a suggestion of full-scale marble reconstruction of the Parthenon Frieze) to challenge patriarchal, vertical power and much more. In contrast to speculating on everything, inviting imagination on an open journey through fantasized landscapes we explore queering as a tool producing effects by retaining its relationship with the embodied, the material, and power. Queering offends. Queering subvert. Queering ridicules power; blasts cracks in the firmament. Queering makes us laugh. Queering emancipates

Photo: Roskilde Festival Mud

Photp: Roskilde Mud

Queering Academia

The arrival of the Queer in academia began as a joke. A speculative fabrication. A figure for challenging established academia with the practices and voices of activists and marginalized groups; a promise to introduce perspectives from the margins and - in doing this - enrich theory, practice and reasoning. It ended up as tragedy; yet another theory, reading strategy. Intellectual mind game at its best, dry and empty mannerism at its worst. "The moment that the scandalous formula "queer theory" was uttered, (...), it became the name of an already established school of theory, as if it constituted a set of specific doctrines, a singular, substantive perspective on the world, a particular theorization of human experience, (...)" (Halperin 2003: 340). The addition of "theory" to the "queer" and its recognition in academia especially through the work of Butler (1990, 1993) and her followers produced a creative interpretive repertoire out of performance, speech act theory and poststructuralist discourse analysis that enabled multiple, potential subversions of (gender) roles and other embodiments of power. However, it also stripped figure of the queer from its vitality, eccentricity and provocativeness as it seemed to "melt all that was solid into language" (Kirby 2005) - and theory - with its productive "parodic practices" remaining marginalized, isolated and repressed in reality (Xie 2015: 31). José Esteban Muñoz (2009: 10-15) tells the story of this tragedy as both a matter of intellectualism but just as much of an identity politics, that meant that "queer" lost its relational character as always-in-tension with the, the established, the tradition dominant (the straight, the straightening); as a way of connecting with the potentiality of *other* futures as well as the *relationality* we always find queer-ness tied up in with in our lived lives. As a challenge to intellectual tradition more than yet another one. To quote a queer/feminist thinker who always insisted on retaining this relationality to power, embodiment and futurity, this presumes a recognition of the productiveness of confusion. "Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up or throw the world to the ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground of one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make life feel liveable." (Ahmed 2006: 157). Queer experiences are these moments of disorientation, in which well-known bodies, objects and spaces seem to fall apart and lose their sense. And to be queer is to produce, embrace, and take pleasure from such uncanny moments of disorientation or "queer gatherings" that enable new patterns and new ways of making sense to emerge.



Photo: Video still from "The trial of Zeus"



Photo: Video still from "The trial of Zeus"

Queering the Museum

Queering the Museum was an event that took place at the classical art museum, Glyptoteket, in Copenhagen. The event took its off from a reflection on the centrality of Greek Antiquity and Athenian democracy for the self-identity of Europe, its political institutions and its way of conceptualizing citizens and rights. It was part of the Gay Pride celebrations in Copenhagen, 2019, and the idea was to stage a relation between the antique past, now and futurity with a focus on bodies, sexuality and power. While antiquity produced several interpretations (and ethics) of relationships between bodies, sexualities, gender, territories, rights etc. using the Olympian mythography to play these out, modernity fixated these into an example of what have been called an "Authorized Heritage Discourse" that "frame certain concepts, issues or debates (...) in so far as they constitute, construct, mediate and regulate understanding and debate" (Smith 2006: 4). With regards to antique European heritage and mythography, this discourse is enacted through popular and political linkages with ideas of vertical, power structures, rationality and patriarchy as being natural (and superior) modes of reasoning and power and particular professional aesthetics of monuments and statues. We wanted to propose a less universalistic conception of antiquity as consisting of a plurality of interconnecting narratives emphasizing resistances, variations and dissonances (Delanty 2017). The direct inspiration came from Atwood's account of the return of Ulysses, as seen from the perspective of his wife Penelope (2005), and the event took place as a belated trial of the God-Father Zeus and his monstrosities towards women, his own children and humankind in general, with audiences participating as jury and stone statues in the hall as witnesses. Musealization often involves, a process of "killing" material objects, stripping them off from their relation to lived life (Dudley (2011). We wanted instead to present audiences with an experience of the ongoing live-ness (Reason and Lindelof 2016), of the past events by resurrecting the rich, mythological material in the ancient texts and the marble statues in the museum hall, to destabilize, disorient and question Antique mythography - queer it –and open up for new patterns for future coexistence, new ways of making sense to emerge.

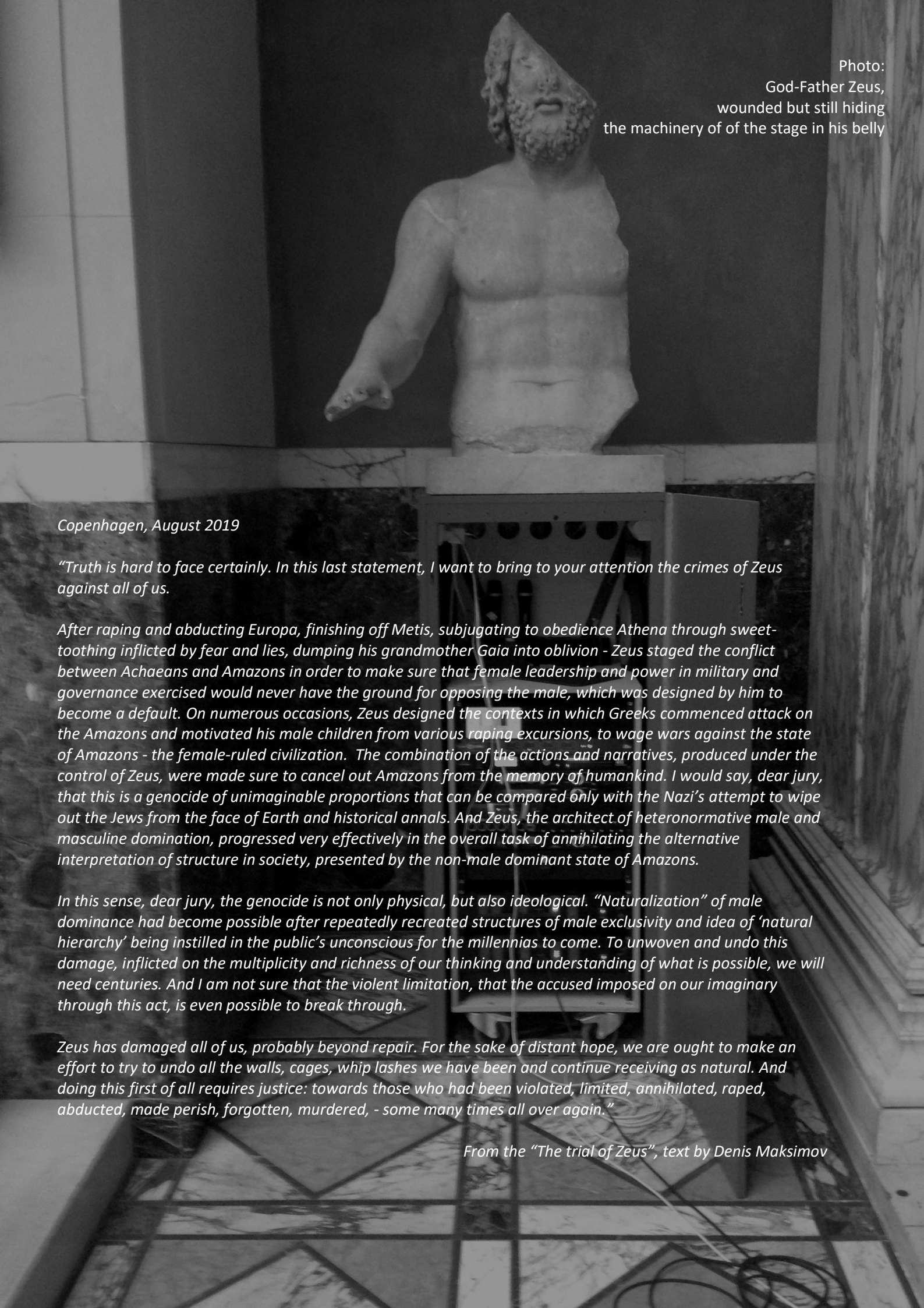


Photo:
God-Father Zeus,
wounded but still hiding
the machinery of of the stage in his belly

Copenhagen, August 2019

"Truth is hard to face certainly. In this last statement, I want to bring to your attention the crimes of Zeus against all of us.

After raping and abducting Europa, finishing off Metis, subjugating to obedience Athena through sweet-toothing inflicted by fear and lies, dumping his grandmother Gaia into oblivion - Zeus staged the conflict between Achaeans and Amazons in order to make sure that female leadership and power in military and governance exercised would never have the ground for opposing the male, which was designed by him to become a default. On numerous occasions, Zeus designed the contexts in which Greeks commenced attack on the Amazons and motivated his male children from various raping excursions, to wage wars against the state of Amazons - the female-ruled civilization. The combination of the actions and narratives, produced under the control of Zeus, were made sure to cancel out Amazons from the memory of humankind. I would say, dear jury, that this is a genocide of unimaginable proportions that can be compared only with the Nazi's attempt to wipe out the Jews from the face of Earth and historical annals. And Zeus, the architect of heteronormative male and masculine domination, progressed very effectively in the overall task of annihilating the alternative interpretation of structure in society, presented by the non-male dominant state of Amazons.

In this sense, dear jury, the genocide is not only physical, but also ideological. "Naturalization" of male dominance had become possible after repeatedly recreated structures of male exclusivity and idea of 'natural hierarchy' being instilled in the public's unconscious for the millennias to come. To unwoven and undo this damage, inflicted on the multiplicity and richness of our thinking and understanding of what is possible, we will need centuries. And I am not sure that the violent limitation, that the accused imposed on our imaginary through this act, is even possible to break through.

Zeus has damaged all of us, probably beyond repair. For the sake of distant hope, we are ought to make an effort to try to undo all the walls, cages, whip lashes we have been and continue receiving as natural. And doing this first of all requires justice: towards those who had been violated, limited, annihilated, raped, abducted, made perish, forgotten, murdered, - some many times all over again."

From the "The trial of Zeus", text by Denis Maksimov

Credits

“The Trial of Zeos” was a performance lecture curated by Michael Haldrup, and written by Denis Maksimov and performed by Michael, Denis and Linh Le as part of the event “Queering the Maseum” curated by Denis and Michael held at Glyptoteket during Copenhagen Pride week August 2019

Photos by

Michael Haldrup (1 & 4) and Filip Vest (2 & 3)

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